TO LIFE!

May 22, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 20:19-22
Ezekiel 37:1-10

"I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live."
-Ezekiel 37:10 (RSV)

Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is one of the most powerful images in all literature! Scholars suggest that it may have been a battlefield. Whatever it was, actual place or prophetic vision, it represented hopelessness, despair, the shattered aspirations of a people who were convinced that God had chosen them but now abandoned them. Their armies are defeated, their cities ruined, their people in exile. And this final, grim field is an eloquent metaphor for the reality of their situation - and their hopes for the future.

"Can these bones live?" Who hasn't asked that at some time or other? Who hasn't looked out across a valley of dry bones - a landscape littered with broken promises, shattered dreams, defeat, failure and hopelessness - and pondered the absolute dearth of hopeful prospect? Who hasn't wondered if there is any reason to be hopeful and confident?

One who has recently wrote a book about it. Dan Wakefield, journalist, author of several best sellers, screenwriter, has published a book entitled, Returning, A Spiritual Journey. The introduction of the book struck me as a kind of contemporary paraphrase of Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones.

"One balmy spring morning in Hollywood, a month or so before my forty-eighth birthday, I woke up screaming. I got out of bed, went into the next room, sat down on a couch, and screamed again. This was not, in other words, one of those waking nightmares left over from sleep that is dispelled by the comforting light of day. It was, rather, a response to the reality that another morning had broken in a life I could only deal with sedated by wine, loud noise, moving images, and wired to electronic games that further distracted my fragmented attention from a growing sense of blank, nameless pain in the pit of my very being, my most essential self. It was the beginning of a year in which I would have scored in the upper percentile of those popular magazine tests that list the greatest stresses of life: I left the house I owned, the city I was living in, the

work I was doing, the woman I had lived with for seven years and had hoped to remain with the rest of my life, ran out of money, discovered I had endangered my health and attended the funeral of my father in May and my mother in November.

"In that first acute stage of my crisis I went to doctors for help, physical and mental. I told an internist in Beverly Hills that I had an odd feeling my heart was beating too fast and he confirmed my suspicion. My 'resting' pulse rate was 110, and the top of the normal range is 100. He prescribed medication that would lower my racing pulse. The 'beta blockers' lowered my pulse but not my anxiety. The psychiatrist said I should take a vacation; she suggested Santa Barbara. I pictured myself on the bottom left-hand corner of the map in the dot of Los Angeles and felt I had slid to the wrong hole on a giant pinball machine."

In the middle of the worst of his crises Wakefield remembers the Twenty-third Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Having long ago discarded the religion of his childhood as pious nonsense, Wakefield wanders into a church around Christmas time and suddenly his fight for his life becomes a spiritual pilgrimage. Very gradually the reader is allowed to see a kind of quintessentially 1980s secular man discover that there is an unseen force working in his life and the force is not malevolent or even neutral. It is good, and healing and life giving. It is God, a God whose spirit is the breath of life.

In the story of the Valley of Dry Bones there is a very important idea, namely that the life in us is God's spirit. It is a lovely idea. It is a radically Biblical idea and a very relevant one.

Perhaps its most provocative expression is the first one, in the account of creation in the Book of Genesis. The Bible is ordinarily very careful to avoid casting God's image in human terms. Old Testament religion is always suspicious of idolatry. There are to be no images of God, no idols or icons, no pictures. God, the Old Testament is sure, is not simply a super-human being. There is a fancy name for that way of thinking - anthropomorphism. The Old Testament is against it. And so the Genesis 2 portrait of God is all the more remarkable. In it the Bible risks the crassest anthropomorphism in order to make a point. God fashions a human being out of the dirt, you recall. But it is lifeless. The picture is clear. The deity, slightly hunched over, holding this lifeless lump of mud, then lifting it and breathing into it - the lump of mud becomes a living being. [Genesis 2:7] The Hebrew word for spirit is the same word for breath.

That's the first and most important thing our religion says about human life. It not only comes from God, it is God's Spirit - which is the same thing as God's breath.

The idea appears obviously in Ezekiel's vision. God breathes and the bones live. And it occurs in an intimate and moving scenario in John's Gospel. The Risen Christ has appeared to the confused and frightened disciples. He is commissioning them to continue his work. And, the Gospel says, "he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" [John 20:22]

There has always been a kind of mystery about the topic. The old English called the Spirit of God, the Holy Ghost with the predicatable result that somewhere buried deeply in the theological file drawer in most Western, English speaking novels, is a ghostly apparition, not unlike Caspar - or Dicken's ghost of Christmas past.

Apropos of nothing in particular, except it is the kind of historical vignette I find intriguing, there was a peculiar custom in the early Coptic Christian Church involving breath and spirit. Apparently, when it came time to commission new leaders in the remoter areas, the patriarch of Alexandria would breath into a skin bag; the bag was tied up, transported up river to Ethiopia where it was let loose on the one designated to be the patriarch of the Ethiopian Church. [Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John, Volume II, p. 1023]

The ancient church had no monopoly on strange customs, strange ideas about the Spirit. In fact, the current assumption is that whatever Christians mean by the Holy Spirit, it must be bizarre, extraordinary, eccentric. The "sound and fury" of television charismatics have given one of our dearest ideas a bad name.

The very word Spirit makes us nervous, anxious, embarrassed. There are at least three reasons.

One. In our scientific, technological age, it is unsophisticated to talk about or even acknowledge the existence of the transcendent. I attended a college Baccalaureate last Sunday which somehow managed to consume an hour without so much as a reference to God - until the end, when the Dean pronounced the benediction. William Buckley once quipped on a television interview that "if you mention God more than once at New York dinner parties, you aren't invited back." And Wakefield tells about having to sneak across Boston Commons on a Sunday morning, wearing the give-away suit and tie, hoping his friends "would all be home doing brunch and the Sunday papers so he would not be caught in the act." [Wakefield, op. cit., p. 15]

Two. Self-designated spirit filled people seem to be overly enamored with their own spiritual experiences, unable to talk about much else, and have a tendency to expose that which you and I have been taught to regard as personal and private. In his wonderful new book, Whistling in the Dark, Frederick Buechner writes about spirit filled Christians -

"They are apt to have the relentless cheerfulness of car salesmen. They speak a great deal about 'the Lord' as if they have him in their hip pocket and seem to feel that it's no harder to figure out what he wants them to do than to look up in Fannie Farmer how to make brownies." [p. 23]

Three. We are nervous about the idea of the Holy Spirit because of the popular stereotypes... including the affectations of the television healers and speakers in tongues. There is a wonderful story about a man who wandered into a Presbyterian Church, not unlike this one I suppose, took a seat in the back pew and promptly began to respond to the sermon - audibly. "Amen" he said. "Hallelujah." "Praise the Lord." People around

him got pretty uncomfortable. Finally, an usher approached. "Sir," he said, "is there something wrong?" "Why no," the man said. "I've got the Spirit." To which the usher responded, "Well, you certainly didn't get it here."

What the Bible says is that to be inspired, filled with the Spirit - is to be full of life... full of the breath of God. Experiences of God's Spirit, therefore, are deeply human experiences. Not so much extraordinary, peculiar, strange - but ordinary human experiences full of God's goodness, love and lively creativity. God breathes into the lump of mud and it becomes a human being. God breathes on the bones and they live. Jesus breathes on scared disciples and they become lively advocates and courageous fighters.

What the Bible means by life in the Spirit is a human being fully alive. Spiritual experiences are not removed and remote, but the most deeply and profoundly human experiences. The Holy Spirit in your life is not an aberration or an apparition but those times when you know yourself most profoundly to be alive: experiences of creativity, passion, exhilaration, hard work, beauty, love.

The life in us - the breath in our lungs is the Spirit of God. It is intriguing to learn that breathing is an important aspect of many of the oldest traditions of spirituality. In a remarkable book, The Relaxation Response, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School documents the connection between blood pressure, pulse, and general well-being and the meditation techniques of Eastern religion, including disciplined breathing. It is the reason for the "runner's high," the experience of physical exhilaration known to the worldwide cult of joggers, and the general feeling of physical and spiritual well-being which is part of vigorous physical activity. Benson says we feel better and are better - when we do some intentional and deep breathing. Somehow I think the Bible already knows that, i.e. that the life in us is breath - God's breath.

So, the spirit-filled life is not necessarily peculiar, esoteric: it is surely not the superlatively pious life. Spirit-filled life - spiritual life - is deeply, intentionally and passionately human life.

Not everyone understood what Bonhoeffer meant when he talked about religionless Christianity. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Nazi prison cell, realized that what the Creator wants most of his creatures is for them to be fully alive - fully human.

Bonhoeffer wrote:

"A person must plunge into life. To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some form of asceticism, but to be a man." [Letters And Papers From Prison, p. 222-223]

Last Sunday the Gospel was articulated at graduation, not unfortunately at Baccalaureate, but during the commencement address by Charlotte Hunter Gault, of the MacNeil/Lehrer Report. Miss Gault was the first Black woman to graduate from the University of Georgia and told a bit about the harassment, the destruction of her property, the hatred, abuse and the loneliness. Why? Why do it? She quoted Oliver Wendell Holmes:

"To be alive means to be a part of the action and the passion of one's times; not to be a part of the action and passion of one's time is not to have lived at all."

That's what God wants. That's what God breathes into the lump of lifeless dirt - gloriously human life. And that is what our religion tries to say when it uses Holy Spirit language. We are full of God's Spirit, not so much when we are behaving peculiarly but when we are so full of life we can't contain ourselves; when we love life so passionately we become angry when it is denied or hemmed-in or oppressed. We are full of the Holy Spirit when we are overwhelmed by the beauty, ecstasy and profundity of life in us. When a new baby moves us to tears, when another loves us with such grace we cannot begin to describe it, when we hold the hand of a dear one dying and know about love deeper than words. When we walk through profound grief. When music, art, human effort, human passion, affirm and celebrate the life in each of us - that's God's Spirit.

You can see it almost anywhere... when human beings reach down inside themselves and discover strength, character and humanness that they didn't even know was there. When they become unusually themselves, uncharacteristically human - the Bible would say they are full of the Holy Spirit. It touches me deeply when human beings begin to discover how magnificently human they are. I recall it vividly as I have watched my own youngsters: saw them square their shoulders and play the cello solo, run the race, or come up to bat with two out, bases loaded and a hundred screaming parents lining the field... and they discover something of their own humanness - which I know is God's breath in them. You have seen it too, in your own life and the lives of those dear to you.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. On this day, for 2,000 years, the Christian Church has remembered a day when frightened followers of a crucified rabbi turned into courageous advocates of the Risen Christ. They called it the descent of the Spirit and they described it with vivid images of fire and wind. People did act strangely that day - so much so that those around them thought they were drunk. But what that first Pentecost really was, was the discovery of their own humanity. What it really was about was the power and courage and love - inside them, now living in the world.

It is one of our dearest and most important ideas... The life in you, as close to you as the breath in your lungs, is God's Spirit...

What your Creator wants of you is for you to be fully alive... not a spectator in life, but a passionate participant.

For each of us there is a Valley of Dry Bones this morning... ruined dreams, crushed expectations. It may be a marriage that seems dead. It may be a relationship that is over. It may be a career which is at a dead-end. It may be that you have stopped dreaming and hoping and caring.

God - we persist in believing - breathes life into us. There was a picture in magazines and on posters a while ago. I believe it was an ad for fire prevention. It showed a firefighter with the limp body of a child in his arms, lifeless, and he was breathing his breath into the child.

If Genesis can risk a little anthropomorphism, so can we. I invite you to ponder that. It may not be easy, but draw yourself and the God who created you and loves you and wills your humanity - into it.

"Behold, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live."

Thanks be to God. Amen.